



Opening Doors, Changing Lives

DIVISION OF MENTAL RETARDATION SERVICES

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BEST PRACTICE

For Disability and Aging Groups, Peer Counseling Works

*(taken from the
Consumer Choice News)*

Fifteen million Americans take part in some form of peer counseling and support. The success of such approaches, first used by Alcoholics Anonymous in the 1930s, stems from many different factors.

The size and complexity of our institutions, as well as the ability of many self-help programs to out-perform professionals, contribute to the appeal of peer counseling. Both the aging and disability communities use peer counseling and support services, but disability groups have used them in more

settings and services than the aging community.

In fact, disability groups probably use peers for more types of services than any other group. One reason is that peers are more able than professional counselors to accelerate a person's transition to independent living.

Peer counselors share the feelings and personal issues concerning disabilities, and they focus on strengths rather than the disability or weaknesses.

Peer counseling may include support and friendship, assistance in problem solving, skills training, experienced advice, non-directive counseling, and group and individual counseling.

Program models may include:

- conventional services that use supervised paraprofessionals;
- field approach with volunteer counselors with a range of experience doing outreach, information, and referral;
- rehabilitation approach with former clients working with new clients (generally, this model is associated with structured training and supervision);
- instructional approach with peer tutors; and
- community approach with "natural helpers" providing support through community networks and activities.

Most programs use a combination of models based on the needs of their people.

Although peer counseling and peer support programs for older adults and for the younger disabled differ significantly, there are important similarities.

Surveys suggest that both communities are more comfortable with peer counselors than with professionals, and thus are able to talk and share information more readily. Both groups view peer counselors as positive role models, who — because of shared or similar life circumstances — have more credibility than a professional counselor.

And, in both groups the services are mutually beneficial to consumers and counselors. Counselors increase their productivity, self-esteem, and coping skills. Participants in peer counseling generally view themselves as more worthwhile and valuable, and tend to be healthier and more productive than in other settings.

Peer counseling, then, can be productive both for persons with disabilities and older people. For promoting autonomy, self-respect, and effective problem solving, peer counseling works.

New Superintendent Named at CBDC

Frances Washburn, Interim Superintendent since September 1, 1999, has been named Superintendent of Clover Bottom Developmental Center.

Ms. Washburn's appointment was announced by Steve Roth, Middle Tennessee Regional Director, effective December 17.

Ms. Washburn has more than 30 years of state service and prior to being named as Interim Superintendent, served as Deputy Superintendent of Clover Bottom.

Larry Comes Home

Larry went to Clover Bottom Developmental Center before Greene Valley Developmental Center was built.

After the establishment of Greene Valley, his family did not want to transfer him there because it would be easier traveling from Chattanooga, his hometown, to Nashville to visit him.

Last fall, after 40 years, Larry returned home. His family built him a house on the family home place.

In The Community

- Pacesetters of Warren County held an open house in November to show off its new facility. The building, located in McMinnville, provides a working environment for 40 persons with mental retardation.
- The Horsing Around Pavilion, which provides recreation and growth opportunities to persons who are mentally challenged, opened outside Jonesborough. Owner David Crockett says the program is a cross between a day camp and an activity center for people with disabilities.
- The TN Developmental Disabilities Council will host a Youth Leadership Forum, June 26-29 at Vanderbilt University in Nashville. The four-day event is designed to prepare high school juniors and seniors with disabilities to overcome barriers to education, employment and social participation they face as young adults.

Transportation Needs Led to New Car for Kathy

There was growing concern about how to respectfully meet Kathy's transportation needs while ensuring her safety.

Her circle of support was stuck. Traditional options just didn't work for Kathy. Everyone was growing more and more worried as Kathy sometimes needs to communicate behaviorally when she is distressed.

This was putting her and her companion at risk when on the road (not to mention all the other drivers out there).

First attempts to try and figure this out were fruitless. No one could see a way out of the box. Of course, there was a brief period of dissension where everyone was pointing fingers at each other saying this is your responsibility; but Kathy's circle dug their heels in and pulled together.

A vision of what "safe transportation" would look like according to Kathy was developed. Everyone put their hard feelings aside and brainstormed.

The resolution that made the most sense was that Kathy should have her own car with the necessary adaptations to ensure her safety.

It all was really simple in hindsight (and far more cost effective than contracting out for specialized transportation). Kathy's family agreed to take out a loan and to cover the costs of insurance. Arrangements were

made to make sure that the car payment and maintenance costs were affordable.

People close to Kathy found community resources so that the unique adaptations could be made. Outcome: Kathy is now the proud owner of a (nearly) new car! The car remains hers, even if she should decide to pick another provider in the future.

Another subtler outcome is a true partnership, which is solely focused on the needs of the person we all really work for, has begun to be forged.



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